

Using an Anti-Oppressive Framework for Teaching Social Studies to Preservice Teachers

EDEL 406: Social Studies Methods

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Introduction

In 2021, I came to Xavier to begin my professional journey into higher education after teaching in an urban public school district for 22 years. As a university alumni three times ('98, '01, and '19), Ignatian pedagogy has been at the core of my education, both as a student and an educator, by viewing teaching as a vocation and a service to others. After conversing with my Ignatian Mentor Dr. Peter Mallow about how Ignatian pedagogy fits into our chosen professional pathways, I began to realize the connection between our Ignatian values and the anti-oppressive teaching framework I use as a foundation for one of my courses.

EDEL 406: Social Studies Methods is a course I have redesigned over the last year. The course prepares university students for teaching social studies to children in preschool through fifth grade using a holistic, developmentally appropriate perspective. Because many classrooms today are comprised of a diverse group of students with various linguistic, ethnic, religious, cultural, and socio-economic differences, teacher preparation must include how “to value and serve a far more diverse group of young learners and families than at any time in the past” (NCSS, 2017, para. 5). Implementing an anti-oppressive framework to the social studies disciplines of history, economics, geography, and civics can be a great starting point for building a social studies curriculum that goes beyond being diverse and inclusive but rather transformative in striving for equity and justice among all people (Rodriguez & Swalwell, 2022). Furthermore, adopting this framework for EDEL 406 aligns with the Ignatian pedagogical approach of developing competency and compassion in students.

An anti-oppressive teaching framework allows students to learn about the many types of prejudices that lead to injustice and inequity among people as well as the many struggles against oppression (Rodriguez & Swalwell, 2022). Anti-oppressive teaching addresses controversies and avoids indoctrination so students are engaged in a rigorous curriculum that allows for critical thinking and reflection. Furthermore, social studies pedagogy needs to include instructional methods that are “meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active” (NCSS, 2017). In many classrooms across the nation, social studies instructional time is given less than ten percent of a typical school day (Tyner & Kabourek, 2021). Therefore, it is important to make that ten percent intentional in implementing social studies content that allows students “to understand, participate in, and make informed decisions about their world” (NCSS, 2017).

The following describes how the current curriculum for EDEL 406: Social Studies Methods connects an anti-oppressive teaching framework to various Ignatian Values using a robust social studies pedagogy.

Reflection

Reflection allows us to “pause and consider the world around us and our place within it” (jesuitresource.org). In the course curriculum, reflection can be found in numerous ways.

- One of the required texts for the course is *Social Studies for a Better World: An Anti-Oppressive Approach for Elementary Educators* (Rodriguez, N. N. & Swalwell, K., 2022). Because the text is written in narrative form and recently published, it easily allows pre-service teachers to make connections to current global issues and acts of oppression. The text is great for an education methods course because it “offers a mix of discussion or written reflection opportunities and examples of teacher activities” that students may experience in their own classrooms (Buchanan, 2023, p. 663).
- In class, students participate in discussions that require them to reflect on course readings, classroom instructional strategies, and teaching materials. These reflections connect to the importance of being anti-oppressive in the classroom, the community, and globally. Students critically examine elementary resources such as picture books, chapter books, instructional videos, and primary and secondary sources using guiding questions to reflect upon potential oppressive behaviors (Appendix A).
- In the beginning of the semester, students take a survey to measure their cultural competency and then reflect on how it increased throughout the semester (Appendix B). Students identify specific assignments or experiences that broadened their global awareness and negated potential oppressiveness.
- Part of the requirements for EDEL 406 is to engage in professional development. Students complete a service-learning experience by volunteering at a local non-profit that provides free materials to teachers serving in under-privileged schools. A second professional development is chosen by the student to increase their cultural competency. After each experience, students write a reflection on how the experience coincides with an anti-oppressive teaching framework, addresses controversial topics, and is impactful to the education profession.

Discernment

Discernment encourages us to “make decisions and take actions that will contribute good to our lives and the world around us” (www.jesuitresource.org). Using an anti-oppressive framework for teaching is a continuous cycle of making decisions and taking actions. Throughout the semester, students engage in daily and semester-long decision-making opportunities that promote a better world.

- One class session has time devoted to distinguishing between a dominant narrative, the more main-streamed version of an event, and a counter narrative, the additional information and perspectives that are not included in a dominant narrative. “Counter narratives are stories that question and complicate the status quo” to give better understanding of how historical events happened (Rodriguez & Swalwell, 2022, p. 5). By offering more complexity to the narrative, counter narratives assist in situating dominant narratives as “constructions that perpetuate inequities and injustices” (p. 5). The ongoing process of learning counter narratives rather than relying on the dominant narratives of

our history allows students to question the accuracy of an event, examine the reasoning and sources, and imagine how the event could have changed the lives of the oppressed.

- Students scrutinize and present on various problematic social studies that include normalization, idealization, heroification, and gamification of historical events, figures, and resources. For example, un-normalizing family structures is one tactic for teaching anti-oppression. Students examine ways to highlight several types of families to replace the stereotypical image that a family consists of a dad, a mom, biological children, and a pet, thereby making the standard of a family broader and more accepting. For gamification, students examine how using historical events to create a simulation or game can reinforce the dominant narrative, decenter the marginalized perspective, and possibly traumatize the elementary students by assigning problematic roles or tasks (Rodriguez & Swalwell, 2022).
- One major assignment of the course is to create a campus sustainability project using a project-based learning approach. This assignment is interdisciplinary with the Science Methods course and the Play course and requires students to work collaboratively to plan and implement a project that promotes global awareness. Students understand the importance of how action to solve an identified problem contributes to the good of our lives and the world in which we live.

Solidarity and Kinship

Learning from our companions is an important piece of solidarity and kinship. The following pieces of the EDEL 406 curriculum highlight the presence of solidarity and kinship using classroom text, collaboration, and experiential learning.

- The course prepares students to teach social studies through a lens of equity and justice using a global perspective. The required text *Social Studies for a Better World: An Anti-Oppressive Approach for Elementary Educators* (Rodriguez & Swalwell, 2022) speaks to the importance of equity and justice. The text is written in narrative form and “lays out (the) vision for an elementary education that helps young people find value in learning about the world through the social studies disciplines and to help make their communities more just, equitable, and healthy” (p. xiv). Therefore, the authors of the text serve as companions in teaching the importance of adopting an anti-oppressive mindset.
- Another curriculum piece that is embedded in EDEL 406 is COIL, a Collaborative Online International Learning opportunity that enhances student interaction with university students from another country over a five-week span. This learning experience provides a platform for my students to work alongside international students as they navigate language barriers, time zone differences, and various education expectations. COIL supports an anti-oppressive learning approach by allowing students to become more aware of other perspectives, increase their cultural competency, and expand their global awareness.
- In tandem with the course, students have a field experience in a K-3 classroom that is selected for its diversity of students. Each student has a Mentor Teacher who guides and strengthens their teaching practice using various instructional strategies, differentiation

techniques, and technology resources. This teaching experience provides students the importance of acquiring knowledge about student backgrounds, adjusting curriculum to meet multiple learning needs, and celebrating the uniqueness of every child, which are all important attributes for anti-oppressive teaching.

Service Rooted in Justice and Love

Making an investment to better the well-being of others is highlighting service rooted in justice and love. Similarly, an anti-oppressive teaching framework is one that finds value in learning about the world and identifying how communities can be more just, equitable, and healthy (Rodriguez & Swalwell, 2022).

- For one course assignment, students choose any holiday or observance that occurs during the semester to research. The chosen holiday or observance can be religion-based (like Ramadan), a cultural observance (like Kwanzaa), or a national celebration (like Memorial Day). Students then present to the class the importance of the holiday or observance and ways it can be included in the elementary classroom using an anti-oppressive framework. This assignment's purpose is to recognize and promote the many holidays and observances that occur for families throughout the school year, beyond the typical Christian or commercialized celebrations.
- During the semester, students volunteer at a non-profit organization that provides school supplies to teachers for free. The importance of volunteering time at this specific non-profit is to recognize the many local elementary schools that lack funds for basic supplies such as crayons, scissors, and paper, and folders, while more affluent schools can request these supplies from families. During the volunteer time, students sort through donated books to decide which ones are worthy of keeping in a classroom library and which ones should be discarded based on physical appearance, cultural relevance, and/or historical accuracy.

Cura Personalis

The care and recognition of everyone as being unique and whole describes the meaning of “cura personalis.” The following mission statements for EDEL 406 represent how this Ignatian Value intertwines with an anti-oppressive framework to advocate for personal development and foster a sense of belonging to everyone in the community. These mission statements are included on the first page of the course syllabus.

- **School of Education Mission Statement** *We are the School of Education, rooted in the Jesuit values of Xavier University, preparing educational leaders to intentionally and reflectively engage in the changing global communities of education by using evidence-based pedagogies. Our mission is furthered by empowering educators to critically examine a wide variety of theories, methods, and curricula in order to implement inclusive, equitable, and culturally relevant instructional practices for a diverse community of learners.*
- **School of Education Inclusivity Statement** *The School of Education supports an inclusive learning environment in which diversity and individual differences are*

understood, respected, and appreciated. Our diversity may be reflected by differences in race, culture, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, ability, and other social identities and life experiences. Our individual differences can deepen our understanding of one another and the world around us, rather than divide us. In our courses, we will work together to dismantle systemic racism while building a learning community that is inclusive and respectful, and actively anti-racist. We are committed to supporting our students and fostering an environment that is free of bias, discrimination, and harassment, in the classroom and in the broader university community.

Magis

Education today has many parameters that teachers are expected to abide by due to the numerous state legislations and high-stake testing. At least 10 states have passed bills limiting the ways race and gender are discussed in public schools since 2021 (Turner, Deliman, & Robertson, 2023). Many states have banned books simply because they feature themes of race, gender, and sexuality. Teachers are often not able to use or reference social studies resources that may be considered “anti-oppressive,” include controversial issues, or are not part of the district-adopted literacy curriculum. Furthermore, many elementary classrooms do not include a social studies curriculum because the priority is on math and literacy to best prepare the students for state testing (Rodriguez & Swalwell, 2022). However, to become an effective participant in a democratic society, elementary children must be exposed to social studies and teachers must teach a social studies curriculum that “provides opportunities for elementary students to practice critical thinking skills while examining multiple perspectives” (NCSS, 2017, para 16).

Therefore, the Ignatian Value of Magis surfaces - “Where is the more universal good?” This question is the underlying response in EDEL 406 when concerns arise that pertain to what defines social studies and what should be included in a social studies curriculum. “Social studies at the elementary level should provide students with purposeful and meaningful learning experiences that are challenging, of high quality, developmentally appropriate, and reflective of contemporary social and diverse global realities” (NCSS, 2017, para 1). During EDEL 406 class sessions, discussions evolve around controversial topics such as injustice, gender inclusion, immigration, poverty, and war. These discussions allow pre-service teachers to make connections between historical and contemporary events and become more engaged in civic discourse (Turner, Deliman, & Robertson, 2023). Various resources on the following topics are shared throughout the course for students to critically examine how each contributes to “the greater good” of a culturally diverse and anti-oppressive classroom.

- A non-white perspective on the topic of slavery
- Literature that includes characters who identify as LGBTQ+
- Stories that discuss mental health issues, drug abuse, or death
- The first Thanksgiving
- Immigration in the past and today
- Heroes of the Civil War
- The history of the Civil Rights Movement

- Debates regarding current local ballot issues or levies

Conclusion

Teaching social studies today tends to be a hot topic in education for various reasons: not enough time, too controversial, its repetitiveness, state mandates or bans . . . and the list goes on.

However, research indicates social studies can play a significant factor in literacy improvement (Tyner & Kabourk, 2021). Therefore, teacher preparation programs must prioritize social studies content similarly to other disciplines (NCSS, 2017). As the course instructor for EDEL 406:

Social Studies Methods, I was intentional in designing a course that prioritizes the importance of social studies in elementary classrooms and advocates for an anti-oppressive curriculum that is supported by our university's Ignatian Values.

“Ignatian pedagogy is a teaching model that seeks to develop students of competence and compassion” (www.jesuitresource.org). Combining this model with an anti-oppressive framework prepares our pre-service teachers with a teaching foundation, pedagogy, and resources to “go forth and set the world on fire.”

References

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Appendix A

Guiding Questions for a Critical Analysis of Children’s Literature

Credit: Social Studies for a Better World, p. 219

Guiding Questions for Text Selection	Guiding Questions to Begin Engaging Students
<p>From whose perspective is the story told?</p>	<p>How are you like _____ (character)?</p>
<p>Whose voices and experiences are present/absent from the text?</p>	<p>How are you not like _____ (character)?</p>
<p>What moral values and sociopolitical messages are dominant in the text?</p>	<p>How does this book make you feel?</p>
<p>How are cultural practices depicted?</p>	<p>(After selecting a particularly important spread in the book) If you could draw yourself anywhere in this picture, where would you be? What would you be doing? What would you be saying? How would you be feeling?</p>
<p>What is the overall tone of the illustrations? The written narrative?</p>	<p>Whose voices are present in this book? Whose aren’t?</p>
<p>How are the lived experiences of historically minoritized populations represented in the text?</p>	<p>Whose experiences are represented? Whose aren’t?</p>
<p>To what degree are complex social situations oversimplified in the text?</p>	<p>How are the issues in this book relevant to you today? To your community? To others?</p>
<p>How are complex relationships between characters represented in the text?</p>	<p>What does this book have to say about the world?</p>

Appendix B

Intercultural Competence Self-Reflection

The items listed below are invaluable in developing intercultural competence and interacting with people from other cultures. Please rate yourself on the following:

5 = very high 4 = high 3 = average 2 = below average 1 = poor

1. Respect (valuing other cultures)	5	4	3	2	1
2. Openness (to intercultural learning and to people from other cultures)	5	4	3	2	1
3. Tolerance for ambiguity	5	4	3	2	1
4. Flexibility (in using appropriate communication styles and behaviors in intercultural situations)	5	4	3	2	1
5. Curiosity and discovery	5	4	3	2	1
6. Withholding judgement	5	4	3	2	1
7. Cultural self-awareness/understanding	5	4	3	2	1
8. Understanding others' worldviews	5	4	3	2	1
9. Culture-specific knowledge	5	4	3	2	1
10. Sociolinguistic awareness (awareness of using other languages in social contexts)	5	4	3	2	1
11. Skills to listen, observe, interpret	5	4	3	2	1
12. Skills to analyze, evaluate, and relate	5	4	3	2	1
13. Empathy (do unto others as you would have others do unto you)	5	4	3	2	1
14. Adaptability (to different communication styles/behaviors, to new cultural environments)	5	4	3	2	1
15. Communication skills (appropriate and effective communication in intercultural settings)	5	4	3	2	1